



Society : Loughton Amateur Dramatic Society
Production : The Stepmother
Date : 28/10/10
Venue : Lopping Hall
Report by : Jackie Mitchell

Report

An almost unknown play, thought lost until very recently, *The Stepmother* focused on the life of one woman in the 1920s. With themes that are just as relevant today, this was a fascinating glance into the lives, and thoughts of at least some of the people of the 1920s. Perhaps a brave choice for an amateur group to attempt, LADS pulled it off with aplomb, providing the audience with a highly exciting and entertaining evening out.

The curtains opened on a nicely detailed set, the pictures on the wall, and a particularly delightful gas lamp adding realistic, homely touches. The throw over the chaise in the prologue struck a rather odd cord, and seemed a little modern somehow, but the contrast once it was removed in the later scenes did help to emphasise the improvement in the financial situation following the marriage of Eustace and Lois. Similarly the overly long brown curtains, but again the change from these in the first act highlighted the improvement in the family finances. Clever use of curtains to mask some of the walls in the scene in Ginevra's, together with some nice props and pieces of furniture helped to change the feel of the set, and convince the audience that the scene was in a different place. Perhaps a couple more drapes, to mask a little more of the main set walls would have helped even further, but this was a clever way to allow a simple and rapid scene change. The use of the extended stage area DSR for the short scene in Peter Holland's flat also worked well, with a simple flat, and a couple of chairs nicely setting the scene and creating another different atmosphere. Props wise, the majority of props fit the feel of the piece, although the bright blue notepad used by Mr Bennet seemed far too modern and out of place. Overall however, the set and props worked very well, helping to set the various scenes, creating the right atmosphere and feel to the play and then fading into the background, thus not distracting from the action itself.

Similarly the lighting for the play was simple, subtle and effective. Some nice touches, such as light streaming through the window in the house, helped to add a realistic feel to the scenes, and the prologue scene seemed dimmer somehow, which again helped to set the mood. Overall, this was not a play that demanded a complex lighting plot, set in the main in one room, the subtle changes in lighting used to indicate changes in the time of day were all that was needed to support the play, without pulling undue focus from the performers.

Costuming overall for the characters was also very good. The dress worn by Charlotte Gaydon in the opening scene really harkened back to earlier days, and the period for this scene was set instantly as much by her dress as by the set. Interestingly, the costumes in this opening scene all managed to feel a little earlier than the 1920s, once again helping to enhance the feel of time passing between the prologue and act 1. Similarly, the wig worn by Lois in the prologue, although obviously a wig, did suit both the period and the shy young woman being portrayed. Overall, the 20's style costumes in the main acts of the play were also very good. The first dress worn by Monica in particular was truly beautiful, although the glittery hairpiece she wore with it could have done with a more secure fastening, as watching it flap about, and waiting (in vain) for it to fall off did pull focus a little in the scene, particularly given the rather strong emotions she expressed at times. The outfits worn by the men all seemed to fit both the class and era of the play, and while a couple of Lois's outfits did seem a little odd and perhaps not brilliantly made for a lady supposedly involved in the fashion industry, the costumes on the whole

once again supported the play very well, and helped to anchor the show in a specific period, something very helpful considering the seemingly modern themes of the play.

With a relatively large cast of eleven, with hugely varying role size, the play definitely offered some of the more major principals great opportunities for character development, something they threw themselves heart and soul into. Opening the play, Eileen Stock as the elderly Charlotte Gaydon gave a very good, upper class characterisation that seemed firmly set in the past. This was a woman who you could easily imagine was not happy with the way the younger generation was going, and the precision in her dialogue delivery was very reminiscent of a bygone era. Although not a large role, the part was crucial in setting up the scenario for the rest of the play, and this was done well with a convincing performance that interacted well with the others players in the scene.

Mary, the maid, played by Lisa Mathews, although not heavily involved in the plot development *per se*, was continually popping up throughout the play, often adding a bit of comic relief to the drama, with some fabulous facial expressions, and a relaxed, chatty characterisation, that seemed to suit the part perfectly.

Iain Howland, as Eustace Gaydon gave a real *tour de force* of a performance. One of the most major roles of the play, his character was a smarmy, slimy charmer, who always knows the right thing to say, and brushes over potential problems with a smooth arrogance that it is almost impossible to argue with. This performance was truly inspired, never pushing too hard or too fast with the character; he was at all times 100% believable. For the outsider looking in, particularly from a 2010 standpoint, it was difficult to watch someone behave as he did, but his performance so cleverly trod the thin line between over and underplaying, that it was easy to understand why his wife was unaware of quite the situation he had gotten them into, and also, why the other men involved in the show would not simply expose him as the fraud they felt certain he was. He seemed completely comfortable in the role; at no stage did the mask slip, yet it was clear to the audience from the beginning that this was not a man to trust. His well controlled performance throughout the play made the loss of temper towards the end, particularly in the scene with Lois at Ginevra's infinitely believable, and a truly terrifying and emotionally wrought moment, for both players and audience alike. His arrogance in blaming Lois for his actions at the end of the play, even after he has been exposed, was so real, and so difficult to accept (at least as a female in the 21st century), that it seemed necessary to remind oneself that in the 1920s her crime probably would have been perceived as greater than his.

Mr Bennet, played by Foster Barnett, evidently did not respect Eustace from the outset, and the subtleties of character required to pull off this difficult relationship were very much in evidence. When the character reappeared in later scenes, he was the epitome of a slightly arrogant, yet still concerned father, who did not want his son to have anything to do with Eustace, but who was not quite prepared to come right out and accuse him, at least not to his wife. The slight air of menace that enveloped him in the prologue worked well, and contrasted nicely with the more concerned persona he presented in later scenes, and the character was at all times believable.

Lisa Maule gave an overall good performance as the heroine, Lois Gaydon/Rolph. Her incredibly shy, demure demeanour at the end of the prologue was very convincing, and it was easy to understand how such a naive young girl could be manipulated by Eustace. In contrast, the much stronger character that appeared from Act 1 onwards took a little while to establish itself, it seemed that Lisa took a short while to get fully comfortable with the role she was playing. However, by about halfway through the first scene of Act 1, she seemed to have settled into the role, and gave a confident and secure performance. Her scene with Eustace at Ginevra's, when he finally reveals that there is no money was a real heart-stopping moment due to both players performances, and her emotional scenes with Peter were nicely balanced. Her very real concern about Monica and Betty finding out about her affair was truly heart-rending, and this was overall a confident and well judged performance.

Monica Gaydon, the older, more out-going, and certainly more vocal daughter of Eustace, played by Sophie Robertson, was the epitome of a 1920s well-off, bit of a flibbertigibbet young lady, fancying herself in love, and deeply upset that her whim is not being catered too. At the same time, there is a depth of sympathy and realness to this character that suggest she is not as superficial as she first appears. This was another confident, assured performance, highly believable, and bringing out great depth in a character in a way that made her infinitely watchable. Her behaviour at the end, when Eustace reveals Lois' affair with Peter was perfectly judged, and her discussion of the situation with her naive sister was delightful.

Simone Webb in the smaller role as Monica's sister, Betty Gaydon, gave a much more subdued performance, as suits the supposedly less attractive, and more retiring sister. Her dialogue was a little flat, and could have used a little more interpretation, however, her performance as the oblivious one when it is revealed that Lois is 'friends' with Peter was very well placed, and helped to add real emotion to the scene.

Tom Donoghue and David Stelfox, as Cyril Bennet and Peter Holland respectively also gave confident performances. Cyril's dialogue did on occasion seem a little wooden, and more contrast and interpretation would have been nice, however, his upper class accent, and his obvious matter of fact style love for Monica were very well placed. Peter also was convincing in his affection for Lois, it was easy to believe that they had been involved, and that he was still in love with her. His scene in his flat later with Lois lacked a little passion, it seemed as if he may have lost interest in her a little, however, his rage at Eustace for the way he treated her later in the same scene was nicely convincing, although a little more menace, and a little less shouting, may have increased the impact and power of the performance.

Mrs Geddies, played by Wendy Butler, and the servant, played by Richard Foster, seemed to be the smallest roles. The servant in particular was on stage for barely five minutes, however, for that space of time, Richard Foster gave a suitably servile performance, and certainly looked the part. A few lines from Mrs Geddies seemed a little insecure, which may have affected her delivery at times, and led to an at times slightly wooden performance. However, at other times, she gave a nice performance as a slightly busybody worker talking to her boss.

Directed by Jean Cooper, this was a highly entertaining and well conceived production, with some fantastic performances and great interpretation of the piece. There were a couple of moments when characters were at least partially masked, at least from some seats in the audience, one particularly bad moment was in the scene with Eustace and Lois at Ginevra's, where Eustace completely masked Lois during some of his dialogue, unfortunately hiding her reactions from the audience, not ideal in such an emotional scene. However, although not a comedy, nice amounts of humour were brought out throughout the play, particularly in moments involving the maid, Mary, which really helping to balance some of the more emotional moments, breaking the tension slightly, and keeping the excitement levels up. Overall this was a fantastic production, leaving the audience on a real high with a delightful ending that truly kept the endorphins flowing.

I would like to most sincerely LADS for your invitation to see the play, and also to say how delightful it was to see such a full theatre on a Thursday night. As I mentioned, I felt this play was a bold choice for the society, given it's unknown status, but clearly you have the talent and interest to put on these lesser known, and for the most part fascinating plays, and I can only hope that you will continue to do so in the future, and continue to attract large audiences, as you most definitely deserve them.

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